

Taking the Plunge from the Blue and Gold Ferry. (Photo: Kate Coleman Collection)

Kate Coleman (L) and Flicka McGurrian emerge from San Francisco Bay at the Dolphin clubhouse. (Photo: Kate Coleman Collection)



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No wetsuits for the serious when making the legendary Alcatraz swim.

-- By Kate Coleman  
Swimming from Alcatraz just ain't the same anymore. Last summer I watched 600 swimmers come through "the opening," the gap between the roundhouse and the curving breakwater that is dotted with cormorants, pelicans and gulls. So many people now seem to be doing the impossible, every one of them thinking, "Whoopee, I'm swimming from Alcatraz to San Francisco," crossing the watery grave of dashed dreams of freedom in myths gone by.

I could no longer claim bragging rights if the world had discovered this swim. But hold on, there. Almost all of them wore wet suits -- some Alcatraz experience, that! It is, to my mind, a faux adventure. If the water is cold, one should experience it.

Still, I believe that some of the swims I do -- like Alcatraz and across the Golden Gate, a swim I hate for the most part -- are a yearly baptism in living rigorously. That and a touch of mystical beauty, a siren call of nature beckoning to join the noisy surrounding sea lions, murrens and pelicans in a water jubilee.

But tell someone you're swimming Alcatraz, the icy, 1.25-mile gap between the rocky island and San Francisco's shore in Aquatic Park, and the response is often: "You're crazy. I thought that was impossible!"

And for nearly an hundred years, it almost was. Alcatraz Island became a federal prison for incorrigibles and high-profile prisoners (including Al Capone, "Machine Gun" Kelly, and spy Morton Sobell), opening in 1934 and closing in 1963. Because of San Francisco Bay's frigid waters and fierce currents, it was considered inescapable. Three people made it off the island in 1962: brothers John and Clarence Anglin and John Morris. Whether they survived the water was never known. Before that, when the island was a military prison, there were several reported escapes in the 1860s, but they remain undocumented. None of the supposed escapees had the luxury waiting on the other side for them as we do of hot showers and a sauna to thaw our frozen limbs. The water temperatures are cold year-round, dropping as low as a bone-aching 46 degrees, though during the strange weather phenomenon known as

El Nino, the Bay temperature rose to a comparatively toasty 67.

This October, a Blue and Gold ferry transported 47 of us out to the island with the water temperature a comfortable 60 degrees. Our swim finish is inside San Francisco's Aquatic cove at our own Dolphin club beach. The South End Club next door also does Alcatraz swims for their membership, and they were the first to put on the swim (in 1967) after the prison closed in 1963. Approaching the island before then would provoke warning shots from prison guards.

The members of both our clubs wouldn't be caught dead in a wet suit, considering such wear for wusses. Many of us, however, do wear thermal caps, bonnets to protect the head. Some wear grease, but it's to prevent chafing, not for warmth.

Out at the island, the ferryboat parked itself near a tiny, rocky beach which cannot accommodate all of us standing. There, we rendezvoused with a plethora of small craft -- kayaks, wooden rowboats from our club and manned surfboards. These "pilots" accompany our swimmers across the breach, threading the best possible course through the end of an ebb or beginning of a flood tide, to aim for the narrow aperture of the cove.

Missing that opening can be devastating. One year, I was hit by a small river of a current pushing me beyond the opening and I hung there, swimming against the tide for what seemed forever, groaning in exhaustion, cold and frustration. Finally, my pilot ordered me: "Quit whining, Coleman, and swim!"

In fury and defiance, I whipped up energy from my gut and broke through the current to make it inside. Two other similarly trapped competitors simply climbed over the low wall under the pier and swam home, their legs and arms trailing blood after crossing the wall's barnacles. It was cheating, but it was also survival.

Piloting is an integral ingredient for our successful Alcatraz swims year after year. Tidal charts and the experience to read them properly and strategize a swim are another. Optimal jump-off times are at slack tide, although the tide can change and run against the prevailing tide closer to shore, as was the case the year I missed the opening. Test swims are done for two successive days prior to these outings to gauge the tides.

The final ingredient is the conditioning of the swimmer. Many Dolphins and South Enders are out in the cove swimming year round, their habitual trips necessary for tempering their swimmers' bodies to cold. It is the reason Alcatraz authorities made one luxury into a necessity: warm showers to preclude any prisoner's attempt to prepare for an escape with daily doses of frigid water.

Of course, one thing the non-swimming world cannot grasp is the sheer, bracing joy of swimming in bone-chilling water. Wet-suiters don't know what they're missing. For us, it's as if the water were simultaneously a velvet and electrifying caress. And there is camaraderie. I regard my fellow swimmers a special breed of kin, maniacs against whom I vie year after year. I love them all, as well as our guardian-angel pilots.

And then there is the ardor of battling the slapping chop of rough water, the indignity of swells and current that can break up the swimmer's rhythm, to say nothing of form or confidence.

All those ingredients play havoc with the Alcatraz swimmer -- even as it did with me so recently in benign 60 degree temperatures with mild winds. But there's still enough to scare: the rude beginning, jumping off the ferry boat and going underwater even before the short swim to the rocky beach for the start. The blast of the ferryboat's horn that signals each of the three waves of slow, medium and fast swimmers. Midway across, hitting chop and not really being able to see exactly where one wants to go, depending then on one's pilot. And the sheer exhaustion, amplified by the cold, of making it through the gap and still feeling the push to crank it up for the quarter-mile sprint to shore.

My time this fall was 46:08. The winner clocked 35:36. The last member slipping under the flags took 1:42:46. It must be said that the slowest swimmers endure the cold longer and are therefore always more heroic in my mind.

Another Alcatraz swim. Another conquest. None of it is easy, and even in this fall's biannual swim, it was a challenge. But as I crossed, I kept wondering how had I ever managed last New Year's Day to do the same swim in 47 degree water with an awesome eight-foot tide. Ah, but then I did the swim a minute-plus faster. Figure that. Of course, my legs that day were limp spaghetti when I hobbled out on shore, my jaw was frozen, and I could barely speak. And it was all unforgettable.

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